MAKING SENSE OF THE SUBURBS

New Guidelines Point the Way for Preservation

We take them for granted, the places where we live. So much a part of the geography of the mundane, it is understandable that the notion of neighborhood as artifact may seem novel. Yet preserving historic suburbs is an increasingly complex and urgent issue, one that the National Park Service has addressed with a new study and publication.

Historic Residential Suburbs presents neighborhoods as documents of domestic America, scrapbooks of daily life from the 1800s through the 1950s. Assembling current scholarship and the latest preservation practices, the guidelines encourage surveys of historic suburbs in support of nominations to the National Register of Historic Places.

Though an evaluation process for suburbs has been in place for some time, co-author Linda McClelland, a National Register historian, describes the guidelines as an attempt "to get people to look at neighborhoods in different ways than they have in the past."

The evolution of transportation has been the traditional frame of reference in identifying historic neighborhoods, since it was the advent of the steam locomotive, the electric streetcar, and the automobile that largely shaped what was to become suburbia. According to McClelland, though, trends in landscape design, planning, development, and architecture were powerful influences as well. The publication provides guidance on evaluating suburbs as manifestations of these largely underappreciated forces. Also examined are critical factors such as zoning, the GI Bill, and FHA mortgages, all of which played key roles in making our suburbs what they are today.

From the early Picturesque movement of the mid-19th century to the sprawling mass production of Long Island's Levittown, *Historic Residential Suburbs* serves as a primer on the evolution of American communities. The major trends are described, many with roots in social reform. Potential nominations to the National Register can be placed within the general context provided by the guidelines.

National Register staffers note a spike in suburb nominations since 1996. McClelland believes that this reflects growing expertise in the subject matter at preservation offices in all levels of government, along with increasing popular support for preserving old neighborhoods. Many States now offer tax credits to people who rehabilitate their historic homes, some as high as 40 percent. This has proven to be a main preservation motivator for homeowners.

At the same time, entire blocks of older suburbs are razed for new housing. A study of 15 landfills by University of Arizona archeologists found that demolished buildings and construction material accounted for 20 percent of the refuse, second only to paper products. Increasingly, specimen houses of particular periods or trends that survive demolishing are altered beyond recognition.

And as waves of neighborhoods from the postwar boom reach the 50-year mark—and become potential candidates for the National Register—a host of questions goes to the heart of what is worth saving. Says McClelland, "The hardest thing is getting people to buy into the idea of preserving places that they see as recent and familiar."

Tract housing may seem a dubious candidate to some. Yet such communities, from their antecedents in earlier design movements to their unique division of social space, are witness to the

RIVERSIDE AND THE PICTURESQUE IDEAL

Platted in 1869 outside Chicago, Riverside exemplifies the Picturesque Ideal, a romantic movement that started in the mid-19th century, when reformers like Andrew Jackson Downing promoted the moral virtues of life in a country setting as an antidote to the evil of the era's teeming urban centers.

"Informal" and "naturalistic" are often used to describe the approach, which put a premium on the land's aesthetic charms and the seamless merger of house and yard into a bucolic vista. Curved streets, expansive lawns, and mature trees were prime components of a design calculated to maximize the pastoral effect.

The ideas behind Riverside—as realized by designers Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., and Calvert Vaux in what is now a National Historic Landmark district—have resounded through the decades.

PHOTOS RIVERSIDE HISTORICAL COMMISSION/ EDWARD STRAKA

CLOCKWISE FROM LOWER LEFT: DAVID ANDREWS/NPS (2); WALTER SMALLING, JR./NPS/NATIONAL REGISTER; JACK E. BOUCHER/NPS/HABS; LINDA MCCLELLAND

TOP AND ABOVE: BALTIMORE'S ROLAND PARK, ONE OF THE FIRST PLANNED COMMUNITIES, ITS WEST WING LAID OUT BY THE NOTED OLMSTED FIRM. NOW ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES.

CONCRETE-BLOCK HOUSE BUILT TO FHA'S "TWO-STORY, SIDEWALL-STAIR PLAN."

LEDROIT PARK, IN DC, AN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER.

KING WILLIAM NATIONAL REGISTER DISTRICT, SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS.

America of their time. In the postwar suburbs, "a distinctive settlement pattern emerged, centered on the single family house on its individual lot," says guidelines co-author David Ames, professor of urban affairs at the University of Delaware, who initiated the study. "It was a landscape in which the free market attempted to meld the attributes of the city and the country into a home environment."

Veterans Administration- and FHA-insured loans made it easier to buy a single-family home farther out than to rent closer in, a pattern that continues today, drawing criticism from New Urbanists. "Each year we construct the equivalent of many cities, but the pieces don't add up to anything memorable or of lasting value," say Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck in *Suburban Nation: The Rise and Decline of the American Dream*. "The result doesn't look like a place, it doesn't act like a place, and perhaps most significant, it doesn't feel like a place." The authors contend that until 1930, town planning was considered "a humanistic discipline" with roots in history, aesthetics, and culture, but later it became a numbers-driven endeavor designed to move people efficiently along the new highways.

In "Interpreting Post-World War II Suburban Landscapes," from *Preserving the Recent Past* (see sidebar, opposite), Ames says that

Online Resources

www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/suburbs/resources.htm

Hidden History, Revealed Landmarks by Alan Hess

The Houses of Levittown in the Context of Postwar American Culture by Barbara M. Kelly

Interpreting Post-World War II Suburban Landscapes as Historic Resources by David L. Ames

Ranch Houses Are Not All the Same by David Bricker

Surveying the Suburbs: Back to the Future? by Claudia R. Brown

Thomas Church, Garrett Eckbo, and the Postwar California Garden by Marc Trieb

Articles originally appeared in *Preserving the Recent Past 1 and 2,* published by the Historic Preservation Education Foundation with the National Park Service and the Association for Preservation Technology International, Washington, DC, 1995 and 2000.

The Garden City

WHEN THE BALTIMORE SUBURB of Guilford broke ground in 1912—laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., and the Olmsted Brothers firm—the Garden City movement held sway. The approach originated in England, tied up with social reform and altruistic intentions for the beleaguered urban masses. **IN THE IDEAL** Garden City, sunlight, fresh air, and open space were abundant. Through careful placement of buildings according to function (commercial, residential, industrial, agricultural), a new formalism entered the suburban vocabulary. **THE AMERICAN VERSION** of the Garden City took shape under the influence of Beaux Arts planning (which emphasized a hierarchy of residential and community space delineated by radial and axial features) and the City Beautiful movement (which sought to elevate the standards, both aesthetic and practical, of American cities). **IN AMERICA THERE WAS** already a strong impetus to develop neighborhoods as residential parks, stressing both architectural character and landscape design. The English strengthened the idea, while emphasizing high-density housing at an affordable cost. Economic analysis entered the planning equation—as did residential covenants in high-end communities like Guilford. **SAY AMES AND MCCLELLAND,** "A general plan of development [and] the use of deed restrictions became essential elements used by developers and designers to control house design, ensure quality and harmony of construction, and create spatial organization suitable for fine homes in a park setting." Increasingly, projects drew on the combined expertise of planners, architects, and landscape design professionals. **ONE INNOVATION WAS** the dividing of land into "superblocks"—unified architectural groups alternating with green space. Planners Clarence S. Stein and Henry Wright came up with the idea in laying out Radburn, New Jersey, a planned suburb outside New York City. **STILL, AMERICA REMAINED** attached to the Picturesque Ideal of the 19th century. Today, elements of its relaxed rural flavor can be found in Guilford—which is now on the National Register of Historic Places—along with the formal precision of the Garden City.

GREG PEASE/COURTESY MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND DEVELOPMENT

"many would argue that the quality of American residential design—and town planning for that matter—reached a peak in the late streetcar and early automobile suburbs."

Yet we are now coming to grips with changing perceptions of postwar phenomena—a pattern not new to preservation. In "Surveying the Suburbs: Back to the Future," also from *Preserving the Recent Past,* Claudia Brown says that "appreciation of Victorian architecture began with the spotlight on the most exuberant Queen Anne extravagancies, and within a few years serious attention was being paid to the neighborhoods of run-of-the-mill Victorian houses."

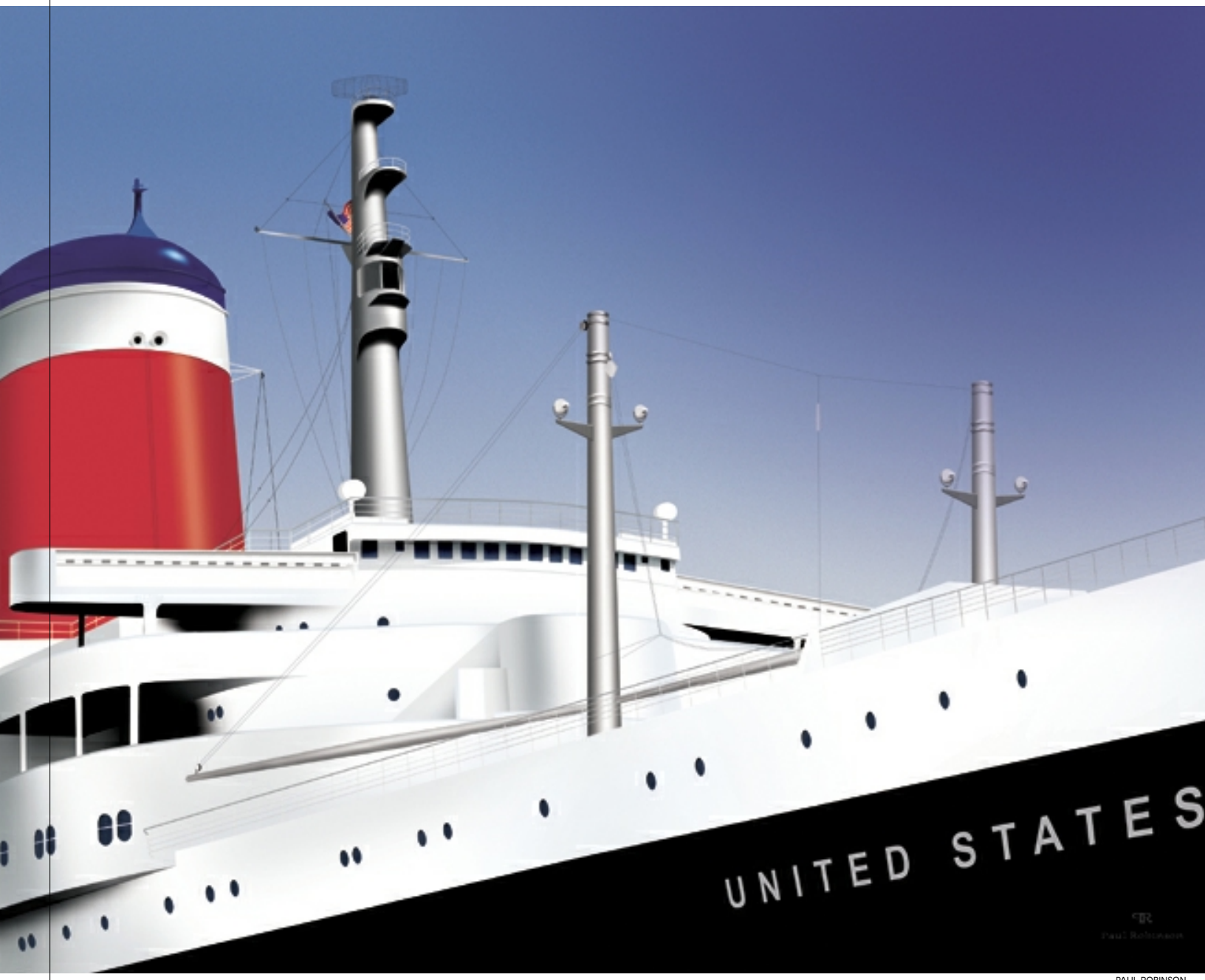
McClelland says that the guidelines in part answer critics who contend that suburbs of more recent vintage do not deserve preservation. "Look at the intentions of the FHA," she says, "which set standards, drew up model house designs, and boosted lower income families into the middle class."

She and her co-author gleaned and synthesized a host of materials for a comprehensive view of the subject that exists nowhere else. "With the guidelines we say in effect, 'Here's what made these neighborhoods work,'" says McClelland. "'Let's re-examine how we came to be where we are.'"

Historic Residential Suburbs, with its expanded view of places and voices in the discourse on the subject, is a step toward preserving a legacy for the future.

***Historic Residential Suburbs* is online at www.cr.nps.gov/nr/publications/bulletins/suburbs/suburbs-start.htm. For more information or to get a printed copy, contact Linda McClelland at linda_mcclelland@nps.gov.**

As a companion to the guidelines, there are plans to release a multiple property form summarizing the characteristics (called "registration requirements") of National Register-eligible neighborhoods. Both resources are intended for States, local governments, neighborhood associations, property owners, or others interested in starting a local survey or preparing a nomination.



PAUL ROBINSON

New Life for Old Hand

Dude Ranch Reborn as Research Center

For over 50 years, the McGraw Ranch operated at the edge of the Rockies. Homesteaded in 1884, it became a lucrative dude ranch during the Depression while continuing to raise cattle and horses. For another half-century the ranch offered tourists an idyllic, though pampered, "cowboy" experience with bunk houses, campfires, and horseback riding. Visitors were urged to "rough it with ease."

Changing tastes left the place fairly deserted by the 1980s. Nearby Rocky Mountain National Park purchased the 700-acre property and its 15 buildings with the idea of returning the site to wilderness.

News that the ranch was to be demolished galvanized preservation groups across the country. Its buildings, they said, were a prime example of 19th century rustic architecture. The park, under the guidance of new superintendent Randy Jones, consulted with the groups—among them Rocky Mountain National Park Associates and the National Trust for Historic Preservation—to come up with a way to preserve the ranch. The result: innovation in both adaptive re-use and partnering in the public interest.

The park, for its part, knew it needed space for visiting scientists and educators.

ICON TO SAIL AGAIN

Once a step away from the scrap heap, the SS *United States,* the greatest "superliner" ever built in America, will once again sail the seas. The once-proud behemoth, on the National Register of Historic Places, long languished at a Philadelphia dock. Following a groundswell of activism led largely by the SS United States Foundation, a foreign sponsor emerged to steer the ship into the future: Norwegian Cruise Lines.

One of the most elegant vessels of its era, the *United States* was an icon and a feat of engineering. It was a crown jewel in a time when a nation's prosperity and prestige were measured by its oceangoing luxury liners. In 1952, on its maiden voyage, it set a speed record for crossing the Atlantic in a little over three days. The record held until 1990. The dawn of jet travel was the beginning of the end for the affectionately named "Big U."

The foundation waged a six-year battle to raise funds, educate the public, and influence decision-makers. The work paid off when the Norwegians agreed to purchase the liner, restore it, and put it to sea as a cruise ship. Though the cost remains undisclosed, estimates run from $200 to $500 million. Meanwhile, supporters are trying to track down the ship's accoutrements, scattered far and wide.

Since Americans make up the largest segment of the cruise market, sailing on an artifact of history could be an irresistible draw—a boon for preservation and the bottom line.

CLASH OF CULTURES

Study Traces Tracks of Indian Wars

THE TRAILS OF THE INDIAN WARS have become legend through countless films and pulp paperbacks; the reality, one assumes, having gone the way of modern development. Yet a blue-ribbon panel of scholars recently studied five survivors as candidates for the national trails system.

THE TRAILS WERE ASSESSED with the criteria used to screen National Historic Landmarks, which has never been done before. Researchers looked at the Bozeman Trail (which traverses Montana and Wyoming), the Long Walk (Arizona and New Mexico), the Northern Cheyenne Exodus Trail (Oklahoma to Montana), the Smoky Hill Trail (Kansas and Colorado), and the Trails of the Great Sioux War (the Dakotas, Montana, and Wyoming). **THE SCHOLARS USED** the standard landmarks approach, employing a tool called a theme study to evaluate how the trails express their era and particular historical themes. This allowed comparative analysis of the potential nominees. Previously, trails were evaluated case-by-case, never in groups linked by an overarching subject. **THREE MET THE CRITERIA** established by the study: the Bozeman Trail, the Long Walk, and the Northern Cheyenne Exodus Trail. There are a number of places along their lengths—forts, a destroyed Indian village, the site of an ambush—that have potential as National Historic Landmarks. *Clash of Cultures,* the study's report, lists them with an eye toward encouraging nomination. **ACCORDING TO** Chris Whitacre, the National Park Service historian who coordinated the study, the impetus now rests with local trail groups or state agencies to take the lead in encouraging Congress to introduce legislation in support of the potential candidates. Meanwhile, *Clash of Cultures* not only sums up their significance, but also suggests avenues for future research.

For more information, contact Chris Whitacre at chris_whitacre@nps.gov. The study is at www.cr.nps.gov/nhl/themes/clash/ClashofCultures.htm.

Left: Navajo woman and baby at New Mexico's Fort Sumner, 1860s. White settlement in the northern Rio Grande displaced thousands of Navajos in the forced removal known as The Long Walk.

COURTESY MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO

COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

So the ranch re-emerged in a new life as a study center. The place retains its original character, but now offers bunks, labs, a computer facility, staff offices, and a library. Rocky Mountain doubled the space for researchers, who study the park to inform science-based management.

Half of the project's $2 million price tag came from park fees for entry, camping, and backcountry permits, under a congressionally authorized program. The rest was raised by the Associates and the Trust. Rehabilitating the place—repairing the log structures, foundations, roofs, and siding—brought out volunteers from Habitat for Humanity and other groups. National Park Service preservation specialists contributed their expertise too. Some 5,000 hours of volunteer toil went into the rehab; a British master craftsman stayed an entire year.

From guest ranch to research center, the project is a reference point for preservation.

For more information, contact Rocky Mountain National Park, Continental Divide Research Learning Center, (970) 586-1394, ROMO_Research_Administration@nps.gov.